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COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF LOW-INCOME CHILDREN--ASSUMPTIONS AND PROGRAMS.

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TO NARROW THE LANGUAGE SKILLS GAP BETWEEN DISADVANTAGED AND MIDDLE CLASS CHILDREN IS A PRIMARY AIM OF MOST INTERVENTION PROGRAMS, ACTING ON THE THEORY THAT INCREASED LANGUAGE COMMAND LEADS TO INCREASED ABILITY IN ABSTRACT THINKING. HOWEVER, THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LANGUAGE AS A COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS AND LANGUAGE AS AN INTELLECTIVE PROCESS. RECOMMENDATIONS ARE THAT THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THOUGHT NEEDS PRAGMATIC EXAMINATION, A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT SHOULD BE ATTEMPTED, AND EDUCATIONAL IDEOLOGY SHOULD BE DEVELOPED WITH A FOCUS UPON THE EDUCATION OF THE DISADVANTAGED. INTERVENTION PROGRAMS SHOULD BE REGULARLY EVALUATED AND IMPROVED AS MORE INFORMATION IS LEARNED ABOUT LANGUAGE AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT. FILLING THE GAP IN LANGUAGE LEARNING IS NOT SOLELY A QUANTITATIVE MATTER. (MS)

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COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF LOW-INCOME CHILDREN:

ASSUMPTIONS AND PROGRAMS

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Report to

Language Development Study Group

Ford Foundation

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Communicative Competence of Low-Income Children: Assumptions and Programs.[1]

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The desired objective of universal literacy has been expanded recently; it now includes communicative competence as an attribute of citizenship. Only one illustration is needed to document this new trend. In the closing days of the 89th Congress, the Department of Labor was authorized to refer persons for instruction in "communication skills." This measure is aimed primarily at improving the speech habits of adult speakers of "dialects", though the precise speech communities to be effected were not specified in the bill. The focus of this specific legislation is the low-income adult, but the target of most of the current programs is the low-income child.

A fundamental premise in current thinking about low-income children can be characterized as the "gap" theory. Children raised in poverty perform poorly on standardized tests of reading. language, and to some extent, generalized intelligence, when compared with "mainstream" children. Language processes are thought to play a crucial role in the acquisition of basic academic skills; and, therefore, low-income children, it is believed, will be helped by early intervention programs which have a strong language focus.

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[1] I have decided in favor of a programmatic paper, in which I intend to stress broad issues. This choice was governed by the recognition that summaries of language work with disadvantaged minorities within the U.S.A. are available; the most recent of these is a book I refer to repeatedly in this paper, Gordon, E. and Wilkerson, D., Compensatory Education for the Disadvantaged, Programs and Practices: Preschool through College, College Entrance Examination Board, New York, 1966.

In addition, the paper written by Courtney B. Cazden, Subcultural Differences in Child Language: An Interdisciplinary Review, Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, July, 1966, is an excellent, up-to-date review of the research literature. The integration of empirical findings presented in her summary cannot be improved upon by this writer.

It might be necessary, however, to reformulate the problems confronting educators today, in order to develop a more analytical model of intervention and language research. Instead of a model based upon comparative evaluations of children drawn from different status groups, it might be necessary to develop a more historical perspective. As Gordon and Wilkerson state in their introduction to Compensatory Education for the Disadvantaged:

> Unlike the industrializing economy of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, our automating economy has little need for the talents the uneducated have to offer, strong backs and clever hands, simple manual strength and manual skill...We have arrived at a period in human history in which man is increasingly required to manage vast categories of knowledge, to identify and solve highly complex interdisciplinary problems, and to arrive at infinitely complex concepts and judgements in order to maintain, control, and advance the technological and social organizations by which we live...And our failure to train the best qualified to the maximum intent is but an extension of our failure to provide even minimum survival skills for this complex age to those whom we call the socially disadvantaged.

The shrinking of blue-collar jobs through automation, and the even faster disappearance of farm jobs, has created a situation in which the children of manual and farm laborers now in school have to be taught skills for future economic survival by the schools. Partial success in the acquisition of school-taught skills is no longer acceptable. The economy has no place left for the semi-literate. But the schools are not educating anyone adequately. The 'hidden curriculum' of the middle-class home offers a substantial compensatory program for the children raised in it. But the schools' failure is merely less visible among those who have daily interactions with college-educated, white-collar, literate adults who somehow prepare, motivate, and tutor their children (often unintentionally) in the skills they themselves use daily in their jobs.

Educational planning, the aim of which is to prepare all children to function in a world of increasing automation, requires an equally complex

strategy. Intervention programs, based upon the various "gap" theories tend to be shortsighted. The role of language in educability, though recognized, is as yet scarcely understood; nevertheless this ill-defined factor is the springboard of most compensatory programs.

A. Some theoretical premises relevant to language and educability

The most serious problem confronting the social scientist and educator called upon to challenge the achievement "gap" is a dearth of available theories. The social darwinism of the past, expressed in psychology in the forms of the hereditary theories of intelligence and educability, are being reconsidered by psychologists, and rejected by most of the anti-poverty workers. This rejection is not accompanied by the choice of an alternative theoretical system. At best, new theories are in the process of slowly taking shape.

In this vacuum, unwittingly, the concepts developed by Basil Bernstein have been seized upon as an answer to those searching for a theoretical handle. Indeed, vulgarized forms of his theory can be found by perusing many of the current publications dealing with the language of the so-called "culturally-deprived." For instance, Bereiter writes:

> Our estimation of the language of the culturally deprived children, agrees, however, with that of Bernstein, who maintains that this language is not merely an underdeveloped version of Standard English but that it is basically a non-logical mode of expressive behavior which lacks the formal properties necessary for the organization of thought. (Underlining by author.)

The pivotal role of language in learning, and conceptualization is not a new concept developed by Bernstein or Bereiter. A great number of theorists have argued for the crucial linkage of language and thought (Sapir, Whorf, Luria, Vygotsky, Watson, to name only a few of the "classic" theories.)

The relationship between forms of language and social class membership, as formulated by Bernstein, and often woefully simplified by his American followers, has become the conceptual framework for many of the new programs of intervention. In one way or another, lower-class children are given intensive training in verbal skills, with the goal of narrowing the measured gap between their performance and that of their middle-class age-mates. Though some empirically-minded psychologists have criticized Bernstein for his lack of factual verification of his theoretical assertions, others have referred to the existing body of literature on subcultural and social class variations in language behavior as supportive evidence. These findings are reviewed in the Cazden paper mentioned above.

The extraordinary attention now devoted to language enrichment in programs for disadvantaged children is a result of two factors: the emphasis given to the role of language in learning by Bernstein and others, and the growing recognition by practising educators, who have found that verbal skills are of crucial importance in reading, and in academic achievement generally. The quality of language enrichment, however, is often weakened by the assumptions upon which these programs are based.

One oft-stated assumption is that the mastery of Standard English is a prerequisite for the development of abstract thought in low-income children. (See Bereiter, Washington Language Arts Program, etc.) In this connection Dr. Furgeson's comments, at the January meeting of the Language Development Study group are of interest. To a query about "primitive language" he referred to studies showing that there is only a low correlation between complexity of language and complexity of society.

Indeed, there is little justification in equating any form of overt language with the process of conceptualization. We are, as yet, profoundly

ignorant about the precise characteristics of conceptual language (both in its overt forms, when appearing spontaneously in the context of everyday problem solving, or in its covert forms, the process Vygotsky has called "inner speech"). Of interest are our findings of a decade ago: (Soskin and John). In taping the flow of language of two adults in a quasi-naturalistic setting, utterances scored as excogitative, or "thinking aloud" were preponderantly sentence fragments, in line with the concept of telegraphic speech suggested by some writers.

In our ignorance of what the process of speech for the self consists of, we have settled on a simple plan in language intervention programs. We teach low-income children, often by means of pattern drills, the language forms used by their middle-class age-mates, because the latter excell in tasks of abstraction.

As a consequence of the assessment of low-income children's language as inadequate, and/or offensive, by those involved in language intervention programs, their objective is thus to replace currently spoken language forms with those spoken by "mainstream" children. Occasionally, the alternative design of multiple codes (school language and home language) is articulated, a plan described in greater detail by Dr. Bailey in her report. It seems to this writer that the implementation of the latter plan is a defensive step, in view of the widespread failure of current intervention programs aimed at the elimination of "vulgar English."

It appears that basic to the theoretical and practical dilemma of the "interventionists" is their lack of differentiation between language as a communicative process, and language as an intellective (intra-personal) process, a confusion which reflects the lack of detailed scientific information concerning the latter phenomenon. As our knowledge of the nature and development of conceptual, or intra-personal language

unfolds, specialized forms of teaching, aimed at all children, will be perfected. Short of such knowledge, the development of conceptual language, an important basis for continuing learning, will proceed by the current trial-and-error approaches. (Some important beginnings have been made by workers such as Arthur Jensen, the Kendlers, Marion Blank, and others.)

It is questionable, however, whether the attempt to teach conceptual verbalization need be accompanied by attempts at the elimination of the low-income child's current speech repertoire developed in inter-personal contexts of his community. As Joshua Fishman stated, in his report to the Language Development study group, "speech communities possess a repertoire of varieties, each of which may have and retain its separate and legitimate purpose(s), even while the repertoire as a whole can be expanded in order to cope with new interests, opportunities or concerns of the entire community or certain of its networks." (page 2)

In summary, the objective of teaching low-income children the use of conceptual language, and to develop new forms of this process, is not challenged in this report. To the contrary, the development of research and educational technology in this area is considered of utmost importance by the writer. But the current reliance upon short cuts and fads in theory, a lack of comprehensive research, and consequently questionable educational practice, lead us to a difficult situation; we may be creating more problems than we are solving.

B. The dilemma of contemporary educators

The language policies of public schools reflect, in a most significant way, a broader crisis. As modern technology advances, the projected length of the "work-life" of the children now in schools is diminishing.

They may indeed in their lifetimes spend more years in school than on the job. But a recognition of the promise and challenge of these changing conditions of life is a topic quite absent in the literature of the disadvantaged. A notable exception is the book by the Yeshiva University authors quoted above, on compensatory education. In their summary, Gordon and Wilkerson submit that: "Education is a function of societal definition and need...In the latter part of the twentieth century educability will be defined in the broadest and most inclusive terms. In the same summary they state: "A second goal of education...involves providing students with an attitude of readiness toward, and an increasing capacity for, continued learning."

Viewed from a long-range perspective, instead of the ubiquitous "gap" theory, two major objectives can be specified:

One goal is the preparation of children to become "permanent learners." Probably no other intellective skill equals the importance of language, in the continuous mastery of knowledge. The fostering of language-related conceptual skills requires powerful techniques in the education of those pupils who have but the school setting in which to acquire, practice, and perfect such processes. (Automated teaching techniques, intensive one-to-one tutoring, and the use of dramatic play, are some of the techniques now in use.)

A second objective is the preparation of children, who once they reach adulthood, can thrive on, instead of being destroyed by, leisure. The need to develop complex human beings with many-sided interests, talents, and curiosities requires little elaboration; the role of the low-income community as a crucial resource in this process, on the other hand, has hardly been explored.

Inherent in the development of automation is the increasing focus upon man-to-machine relationships at the exclusion of man-to-man relationships. The preparation of school children for this era of automation, by educational means that hasten the child's alienation from his fellows, from nature, from community ties, from direct and intense participation in human relations, will not equip these children with skills that will enable them to enjoy the fruits of automation; or to re-establish more social means of communication; or to utilize their language skills. Methods being currently practiced, particularly with ghetto children, may in fact be intensifying these problems, rather than their possible solutions.

By the definitions imposed by the "gap" theory these methods originate outside the urban and rural ghettos. It is perhaps inevitable that they do so.

And yet, within these low-income communities there are untapped reservoirs of cultural diversity and language richness. These indigenous resources, that might be of considerable aid in the teaching of more complex technological concepts, have not been generally recognized. Many readily available language tools have thus not been adequately utilized. Considered to be quaint, at best, and detrimental, at worst, these resources have been poorly understood by outsiders.

Increasingly, the spokesmen of ghetto and tribal communities have articulated their belief that the technological skills of the larger society can be integrated into their own cultural systems, not by counterposing the differing cultures, but by synthesizing them. Vine Deloria, Jr., the director of the National Congress of American Indians, makes this point in his "Tribalism and the Modern Society" ("The Sentinel", Spring, 1966).

Language development is integral to this concept. The educational innovations of the Navajo tribe may serve as an example of how indigenous language forms may be used in this process. For the Navajos, one of the most consciously modern of rural-poor Indian tribes, with a large educational plant encompassing more than 30,000 students, have sought to integrate the traditionally verbal, "preliterate" methods of communication into their classroom language instruction. They have done this, in part, by involving the tribal elders, storytellers and Medicine Men, even at the preschool level, in the 50-odd tribal Head Start Centers.

The emergence of this model may have far-reaching significance. It may make possible the unprecedented development of cultural forms and language diversity of subgroups within this pluralistic society, not only for their benefit, but for that of the society as a whole. If properly understood and utilized it could become a crucial resource, or balance, to counter the increasing standardization that technology, generally, and automation, specifically, tends to impose upon language usage.

The perceptive educator, who is aware of this paradox, has been caught in a difficult dilemma. He may quite clearly see the need for immediate, visible educational improvements--especially in language skills--of the disadvantaged students. On the other hand, he may conclude from the methods of intervention presently practiced, that the improvements achieved may not only be superficial, but ultimately destructive.

Compensatory programs in language acquisition that have been tacked onto existing programs have thus far proven to be insufficient when viewed from a long-range prospective. Yet the alternative development of sweeping new approaches may seem to offer no surer possibilities of immediate, practical results to the hard-pressed educational administrators. And the very nature of compensatory programming demands results with a built-in immediacy.

Recognizing the two tendencies, might then a concurrent approach be adapted, however?

The introduction of new technological devices--such as the Edison Responsive Environment machines, or similar man-to-machine innovations--could be balanced by the farsighted educator by initiating intensified programs of man-to-man classroom experiences. Such programs as the tutoring of younger children by older children, more active participation in the writing and acting of school plays, and generally increased verbalization in group situations, might compensate for the compensating machinery.

Such programs would be aimed at the simultaneous development of greater technical competence and the development of communicative (interpersonal) skills. It is readily apparent that within the contemporary emphasis, and urgencies, these broad humanistic objectives would not be easily achieved. Yet their pursuit would open the path for exciting possibilities in research and exploration. And more complex, comprehensive and cohesive theories of education might evolve.

One role of the Ford Foundation, or similar institutions, within this perspective, might be to forestall the continuation of patchwork language intervention programs, and stopgap educational innovations. The alternative of planning and implementing a farsighted policy in education, a policy to be developed in cooperation by a broad spectrum of social scientists, educators, and laymen, will require enormous public support. One suggestion of how this might be accomplished is the establishment of an <u>independent</u> organization, such as Planned Parenthood--an organization which performs research, service and public relations functions--in education.

C. The role of research and training in program development

Four major areas for research are suggested for intensive development, as a sequel to the above discussion.

The first area, is the programmatic examination of the role of language in thought--an ancient topic indeed. Each generation of behavioral scientists has tackled this problem in their own historically characteristic manner. Studies of verbal mediation in children are an illustration of the contemporary focus. As yet, the intellectual resources of those engaged in inventive, academic, or artistic fields have not been tapped. These individuals, as subjects of research, offer an enormous potential in the description and identification of conceptual language. It is questionable whether we can train any child, disadvantaged or middle-class, to rely upon language as a conceptual tool without a clearer understanding of this process in the adult. This approach has been avoided by psychologists since the turn of the century, because of their profound mistrust of introspective methods. However, there are many challenges to a narrowly behavioristic approach at present; Chomsky's, to mention but one.

The author envisages a new institution, similar in some ways to the Harvard Center in Cognitive Studies, which might focus upon an intensive study of intellective processes in a cross section of "brain-workers" with specific emphasis upon language-conceptual links.

A second area in need of intensive development is that of language acquisition, specifically, a sociolinguistic approach to the development of language. The pervasive and unhealthy focus upon the middle-class child, as the prototype of an articulate speaker and a conceptual thinker, has been discussed. Psychologists have been unable to break away from this normative, and ethnocentric approach in their study of language behavior. A welcome departure in this connection is the Comparative Language

Development and Socialization study (directed by S. Ervin-Tripp and D. Slobin) recently initiated at Berkeley. The major focus of this project is the preparation of a field manual of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic techniques relevant to child language.

The study of the social contexts of language acquisition is of particular significance now, when we are confronted with manifold demands for program development in working with low-income and bilingual children. (See Gordon, E., Summary of the Proceedings of the First Working Conference on Language Development in Disadvantaged Children.)

A third area of great importance and concern is the study of educational ideology, with particular focus upon the education of the disadvantaged. Though the majority of programs, initiated under Office of Economic Opportunity sponsorship, reflect a pragmatic approach to curriculum, there are some interesting exceptions. One of these is the academically oriented preschool program initiated by Carl Bereiter in Illinois. A sharply divergent program is that of the Mississippi Child Development Center. Of particular interest in the latter program is the role of the semi-literate adults in the education of their children, and their formulation of what they consider desirable educational goals. The creation of the Rough Rock Demonstration school, on the Navajo reservation, is another interesting example of a new, tribal, educational ideology. Dr. Bailey's discussion of community attitudes toward education further highlights the need for field work within the low-income communities, to elicit formulations of ideology among the poor. A start in this direction was made at the Illinois Institute of Juvenile Research (J. Hirsch and D. Scheinfeld).

Two disciplines, educational sociology and educational anthropology, hold much promise to those concerned with these problems. As yet, there is little contact between socio-linguists and psychologists with these social scientists.

The fourth, and thorniest area of research, is that of program evaluation. To date, the model of pre-and-post testing, on selected measures of achievement is a ubiquitous one. Rapid advances have been made in the field of educational research in the processing of large amounts of information relevant to evaluation. But the models of evaluation have remained static. The collaboration of demographers, epidemiologists, public health scientists, and educational researchers might accomplish a breakthrough in the evaluation of large-scale interventions. Training and joint activities are much needed in this respect.

This writer has but a few comments to add to the excellent discussions on training written by Dr. Fishman and by Dr. Bailey. The psychologist of language, and the new crop of psycholinguists, are afforded opportunities to acquire or strengthen their training in linguistics. The same cannot be said for learning and retooling experiences in sociology and anthropology. This is a serious lack at present.

One avenue for training and research, is the establishment of field centers, sociolinguistically oriented, in low-income communities. The Tama, Iowa, field station, operated by the University of Chicago, was an effective training center for applied anthropologists, in part because of its proximity to the University, and in part because the individuals attached to the station had an active role in the Fox Indians' economic development. Field stations created in conjunction with demonstration schools could have similar functions.

D. Conclusions

Programmatic intervention, aimed at the development of communicative skills of individuals of low socio-economic status, are mushrooming at an alarming speed. Their goals are determined by what the writer has called

the "gap" theory. The inadequacy of such an approach appears to be the consequence of a lack of theories, though there is no shortage in proposed tactics for intervention. (The present gulf between educators and social scientists devoted to the study of language, is similar to the gulf between the school and the community in minority neighborhoods.)

Two broad problems were delineated in this report: first, the role of language processes in learning and cognition was posed, and the manner in which this link is handled (or mishandled) in language intervention programs was discussed; second, problems of educational planning and policy, as it might effect low-income youth, were raised. Four areas of research development were specified, and some, limited, recommendations concerning training were made.

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